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Plant in Gallatin, Mo., could reopen as a horse slaughter facility

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July 3

BY ZACH MURDOCK
The Kansas City Star

A small family operation about 70 miles northeast of Kansas City is likely to become the nation's third plant that will slaughter horses and process the meat.

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Rains Natural Meats expects the U.S. Department of Agriculture to approve an inspection of its processing plant soon -- perhaps in the next few days.

That comes on the heels of announcements over the past week that officials will inspect horse slaughter plants in Sigourney, Iowa, and Roswell, N.M. Such inspections are the last step before approval of the plant.

The Gallatin plant has been closed about a year, and when it was open it employed mostly family members and at most seven or eight other people. But manager and vice president David Rains hopes that will change now.

"Hopefully we can create some decent jobs for people in Daviess County," Rains said. "Time will tell -- there's a lot of ifs around it right now."

The prospect of slaughtering horses for food has stoked a debate that has now become familiar in Missouri, which saw two previous attempts to open plants fail last year.

"I think it's terrible, myself," said Gallatin resident Margaret Walker. "I tell you what, this will make me quit eating meat, period."

On Monday, The Humane Society of the United States, four other animal welfare groups and five private individuals filed for an immediate injunction against the opening of the plants (/web/20130705235807/https://docs.google.com/a/kcstar.com/viewer?

a=v&pid=gmail&attid=0.1&thid=13fa1081c2b27ee3&mt=application/pdf&url=https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/?ui%3D2%26ik%3Dc55a07e009%26view%3Datt%26th%3D13fa1081c2b27ee3%26attid%3D0.1%26disp%3Dsaf%26zw&sig=AHIEtbT1Sden65eCos9tXzTKJGBk_nQ! on the grounds that the USDA has not produced an environmental assessment of such plants before granting these inspections.

Walker was listed among the plaintiffs, which she said surprised her, but she agrees with the lawsuit.

Amanda Good, Missouri director of the Humane Society, said horse slaughter facilities also carry a stigma for communities.

"A lot of people think that these plants come in to provide jobs, but they're low-paying and low-benefits," she said.

The opening of the plants has its advocates, though.

Within the horse industry, the prices for the animals when they are sold to slaughter set a bottom line value for all horses, said Mindy Patterson, president-elect of the Missouri Equine Council.

"I am absolutely 100 percent in this pro-slaughter movement for the welfare of the horses," Patterson said. "If you have a healthy horse industry, you have healthy horses."

Horse owners have been put in a tough position by a ragged economy, drought conditions that drive up the cost of feed and a disappearing base value for horses, she said.

That has led to people actually having to pay to have their horses sold at sale barns, said Jim Smith, a trustee for the Missouri Wild Horse League.

Some owners have left horses out on their own in the wild, where they often die brutal deaths from starvation or sickness, he said.

Not killing horses has nearly killed the horse industry, Rains said.

When Congress in effect shut down equine slaughtering in the U.S. in 2007, the market prices for horses fell apart.

“It was done with good intentions at the time, but it’s been a very bad thing,” he said.

Funding was reinstated to perform inspections on horse slaughter facilities last year, but efforts to resume horse meat processing have been mired in a back-and-forth between the USDA and animal welfare groups.

Last year, the Humane Society filed a petition with the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service demanding stricter rules to keep certain drugs out of horse meat produced for human consumption. The inspection service rebutted the petition’s claims in a letter Friday (<http://web/20130705235807/http://www.fsis.usda.gov/horses/PetitionFSISResponseShiffHardino6282013.pdf>) and began approving inspections for qualified facilities.

In statements this past week, the department has said it is required to grant those inspections under the current law, regardless of legislation moving through Congress that could reinstate the ban.

Rains Natural Meats is the third attempt to open a processing plant in Missouri since the inspections were re-established.

Wyoming legislator Sue Wallis and her company, United Equine, led unsuccessful attempts to retrofit plants in two Missouri towns, Rockville and Mountain Grove. The effort in Mountain Grove was met with intense resistance from residents, while legal issues tied up the property in Rockville.

In Gallatin, talk of the new plant has been minimal, Mayor Barb Ballew said. She hasn’t heard about the operation in any of her conversations around town and said she doesn’t know much about it.

Before closing about a year ago, Rains Natural Meats raised all natural pork and beef and processed deer during Missouri’s hunting season.

“The market kind of changed, so we got involved in this opportunity to do horses,” Rains said.

Since last September, the Rains family has been working with the USDA to repurpose its facility to process horse meat. In January, David Rains submitted an application for a final federal inspection.

With that lined up to be approved soon, Rains hopes the plant is able to move forward producing horse meat for human consumption.

The market for horse meat will be there, Rains said.

“I think people will be surprised,” Rains said. “It’s one of the highest-quality meats there is.”

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